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ABSTRACT

The booklet is intended to help parents understand and acquire more assertive communication styles in matters of special education. Assertive behavior is introduced, distinguished from less productive behavior styles, and considered in terms of barriers to effectiveness. The booklet proceeds with a discussion of basic legal and human rights that provide the foundation for people standing up for themselves. The mental attitudes that may prevent assertiveness are noted. The remainder of the information focuses on actual skills comprising assertive behavior, including language, techniques to handle aggression, physical appearance, and listening. (CL)

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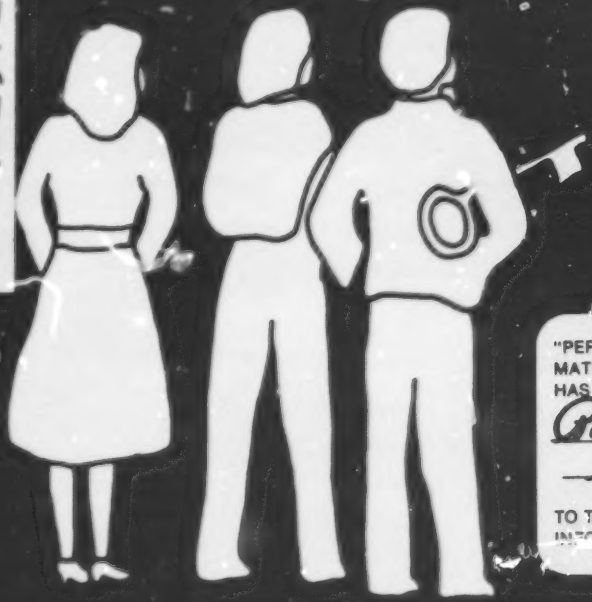

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a guide to effective communication

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UNLOCKING DOORS

A Guide to Effective Communication

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PACER Center is a coalition of eighteen Minnesota disability organizations. Its special concerns are appropriate educational programs for handicapped students and the active, informed involvement of their parents with schools and teachers.

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An introduction to improved communication skills

In giving workshop training sessions and individual assistance to over 27,000 Minnesota parents and others interested in special education, PACER staff members have repeatedly heard variations of the following thought:

"Having this information (on special education laws and parental rights and responsibilities) is certainly helpful...but I wish I knew how to use it. When I go to school meetings, I don't feel I'm really getting my point across. I wish I knew how to communicate better."

PACER learned in talking with parents that they often saw themselves as either failing to present their opinions at all or else as over-reacting and becoming angry and hostile with school personnel.

As a response to this need for improved communication, PACER has compiled this booklet for parents; it can be used by someone working alone although a few exercises will call for friends or family members to participate.

The booklet begins with an exploration of what assertive behavior is, how it differs from certain less productive behavior styles, and why it can produce results.

Next to be discussed are the basic human and legal rights that provide the foundation and justification for people standing up for themselves...and the mental attitudes that often prevent people from doing so.

Finally, the book contains several chapters that deal with specific aspects of assertiveness and provide exercises you can use to develop the skill.

The book focuses on school/parent/teacher situations because these are the ones that appear to present difficulties for parents.

However, improvement of communication skills in these situations may also result in more satisfying interactions and relationships outside the schoolhouse and classroom.

While assertiveness training offers no guarantees, the skills can improve your chances of achieving what you want for yourself and your children.

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When being a nice guy doesn't work

One of the deepest and strongest of all human emotions is the desire to be liked, the urge to avoid making others mad or upset with us.

Unfortunately, parents of handicapped children have often learned that being the "nice guy/gal", the "good" parent who never makes waves, just doesn't work.

Teachers and schools don't deliberately set out to shortchange a handicapped child's educational program. Most often they are trying very hard to provide an education that's a good one. However, a variety of causes - shortages of funds, lack of understanding of a handicap, unavailable programs - can lead to a situation all too familiar to parents of special education students:

Unless they're willing to speak up, their child's school program may simply be the wrong one.

Speak up!

For what parent doesn't that phrase inspire at least some stomach butterflies? For while he or she has quickly learned the futility of a 100 percent "nice guy/gal" approach, other negative situations have also been encountered --

- the school conference where the professionals seemed to be talking in their own lingo or jargon, and the parent - knowing he couldn't communicate in a similar fashion - gave up on saying anything at all;

- the meeting where the principal kept smiling nicely all the time, but the father sensed he wasn't really paying attention to anything he said;

- the times when the mother, a prisoner of her shyness, figured that if she tried to disagree, she'd stutter and get all red and make things worse...so she didn't say anything at all;

- the moments when another mother felt that to insist on what she thought about a program might cause hostility among the teachers that could affect their treatment of her child.

If any of these situations sound familiar to you, you're a good candidate for "assertiveness training," the learning of a skill that will improve your chances of achieving an appropriate education for your child.

Don't confuse assertion with some of its relatives

Assertiveness has acquired a bad name in some circles. It's occasionally associated with classes or training where the participants seem to be taught a philosophy of "I'm gonna get mine and everybody else can just worry about himself."

This is not assertiveness as the term will be used in these materials. "Assertiveness" here simply means the skill of standing up for one's personal rights and expressing thoughts in direct, honest and appropriate ways - while retaining and displaying respect for the rights and opinions of others.

To achieve a sharper idea of assertive behavior, let's compare it with what assertion is not.

Assertion is not aggressive behavior. Aggression is sticking up for one's rights and beliefs in a manner that violates those of others. It's winning at all costs.

The person who resorts to aggressive behavior is likely to find that encounters with others end in hostility, that any victories are only temporary and that satisfactory answers are not found to problems. The participants in the aggressive exchange dread the idea of working together in the future.

Assertion is not passive behavior. Passive, or nonassertive behavior, occurs when a person is unable or unwilling to speak up for him/herself. The nonassertive parents are those who sit at school conferences with smiles on their faces, no matter what is said about their child and the child's educational program. These parents allow others to infringe on their rights and on those of their child.

The nonassertive parents' inner feelings are colored with frustration and with a sense of powerlessness. They feel that their fate is being decided by outside forces over which there's no control. Nonassertive behavior is usually accompanied by a feeling of resentment and, sometimes, guilt after the situation is over.

Before proceeding, let's go through a checklist to make sure that everyone is clear on the differences between the three types of behavior - assertiveness, aggression, and nonassertiveness.

Please place the correct number before each of the following statements to indicate whether it is representative of (1) aggressive behavior, (2) assertive behavior, or (3) nonassertive behavior.

ACTIVITY ONE

___ 1. *Who do you think you are, telling me my child needs extra help? I'm going to tell the superintendent of schools about this. He's a personal friend and will not appreciate your insulting me like this.*

___ 2. *(Remark made to a friend) I'd love to say something about the gaps in the program they're planning for John, but I'm afraid if I do that a couple of the teachers may make it rough for him in other ways.*

___ 3. *I understand that the school just doesn't have the funds for a speech therapist after buying the new uniforms and all. We'll wait and see how Sally's doing by next year. Maybe she'll outgrow the problem and won't need help with this difficulty our doctor asked me about.*

___ 4. *If the teachers in this school would do their jobs, my child wouldn't be having all these problems.*

___ 5. The long term goals you've set up for Mary sound fine. However, I can't agree with the types of math exercises you have planned. When she's learning a new concept, she needs to work with several approaches, not just with seeing the problem on paper.

___ 6. I'm sorry my child can't learn as fast as the others. Maybe his dad and I can work with him at home in the evenings since you say the regular classroom teacher just doesn't have time to give him extra help.

___ 7. You're right. As his parent, I am very emotionally involved with Jim. I love him a great deal. However, that doesn't prevent me from being able to make valuable contributions about the ways in which he learns best.

___ 8. Either you get a special class set up for Roger right away, or I'm going to write a letter to the newspaper and let them know just what kind of rotten school you're running up here.

___ 9. I know that the school counselor doesn't feel that Jack's problems with behavior need any special attention. But from watching at home, I feel his behavior is something more than just ordinary "naughtiness" and I do intend to persist in requesting that he be seen by the school psychologist.

ANSWERS

1 1. This is aggressive behavior; the remark is characterized by hostility and the use of a threat.

3 2. This is nonassertive behavior; the parent is allowing his role to be lessened because of fear of what might happen.

3 3. This is also nonassertive behavior; once again, the parent is allowing her child's legal rights to be put aside.

1 4. This is aggressive behavior; the parent is reacting with threats and anger.

2 5. This is assertive behavior; the parent is being polite but expressing his ideas in a firm and objective way.

3 6. This behavior is nonassertive or passive. The parent is apologetic when she need not be and is allowing the school to ease out of its responsibility.

2 7. This behavior is assertive; the parent is reacting to a comment that casts doubt on the value of her input with a firm and reasonable response that supports her role.

1 8. This behavior is aggressive; the speaker reveals her hostility through threats.

2 9. This is assertive behavior; the parent is politely insistent about standing up for his opinion; he gives evidence for his viewpoint and lets the school personnel know of the strength of his request without becoming hostile.

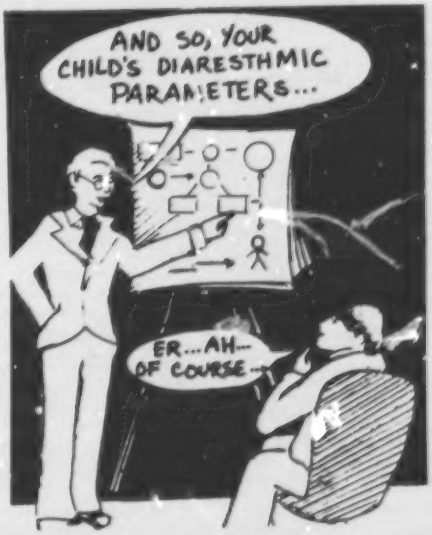
How come it doesn't come naturally?

If it's true that assertiveness is a communication skill that can improve your chances of achieving the results you want, then why doesn't everyone just start acting assertively all by himself or herself?

. Many people simply don't believe they possess the rights that others might be eager to defend. For example, a passive wife might allow her husband to make all the decisions - though some are contrary to what she wants - because she believes she isn't supposed to play an equal part in decision making. A passive husband might allow his wife to always decide what they'll have for dinner or whom they'll invite for a Saturday night party because he believes such decisions are her role -- even though he rarely likes the results of her decisions.

The parent of a handicapped child may let the school shortchange his child's educational program because he's not convinced that the child does possess the same right to a good education as that held by a nonhandicapped child.

. Being polite and nodding consent, even when one disagrees, may seem a lot easier than to risk being thought rude or unreasonable. Avoiding the anxiety that comes when one thinks about confronting a professional may seem like a better idea.



. The parents of a handicapped child may be playing into one of the myths about the mothers and fathers of special education youngsters: that they don't have the

knowledge needed to make decisions about their child's education or that they're too involved emotionally.

. Uncertainty about the "rightness" of what people think may make them hesitant to express much of anything except nods of approval to thoughts expressed by others.

While these are all reasonable concerns, the results of not acting assertively, over a period of time, are likely to accumulate into such a negative situation that the nonassertive person feels a compulsion to change.

Namely, persons not able to defend their own rights and who can't express their ideas and preferences will typically find those rights and ideas ignored by others.

The parents of a handicapped child may find their child's program leading in another direction than they know would be best based on knowledge of the child from the day he was born, on observations at home of how their child learns, and on their own sense of the child's potential.

Nonassertive parents acquire a feeling of helplessness, a sense that others are controlling their destiny and that of their sons and daughters.

In contrast, acting assertively can lead to increased self respect and self confidence and to greater respect from others. It offers a better chance to achieve closer relationships with others because dealings are based on honest and open exchanges of what's on a person's mind.

Finally, by letting others know what a person is thinking, he or she gives them a chance to change a situation. Of course, there are no guarantees. Expressing one's thoughts doesn't automatically mean that others will change their ways. On the other hand, it's impossible for others to even consider a person's ideas unless they know what those ideas are.

For some occasions, nonassertiveness is OK

Before beginning actual assertiveness training exercises, it may be helpful for you to assess the degree to which you already do or do not possess this behavior trait.

There are times, of course, when you may choose not to act assertively. That can be a very reasonable choice to make.

For example, imagine that your elderly and much beloved grandfather has come to visit. He's a gentleman of the old school and treasures those weekends when he can wine and dine his favorite granddaughter and treat her to the pampering she doesn't get much of elsewhere.

You might well choose not to assert yourself, not to explain to him that you think today's woman should open doors and pull out chairs for herself and share equally in the dinner tab.

No one is going to be assertive 100 percent of the time, and that's fine.

However, some situations clearly do require assertive behavior so that others aren't allowed to tread on your rights and those of your handicapped son or daughter.

These are the situations with which this booklet is concerned.

Are you assertive when you need to be? Do you speak up when the situation calls for it?

To measure your "assertive quotient," circle the number which you feel best describes how you view yourself in each situation on the next page.

ACTIVITY TWO

	Not at all Typical				Very Typical
1. I feel comfortable and at ease when I'm at a conference with school personnel.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I ask questions if I don't understand a term or procedure.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I make direct requests for services or options that I feel are necessary.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I refuse to accept plans or suggestions that I feel are inappropriate or inadequate for my child.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I tell others at a meeting if I feel angry or disappointed.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel my child is entitled to the special services that meet his or her needs.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel that my opinions are respected by school personnel.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I tell others at a meeting if I am pleased with or appreciate their efforts.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I feel that I look and act self-confident during conferences.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I feel that conferences result in plans that are appropriate for my child's needs.	1	2	3	4	5

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What do your answers tell you about yourself? If your answers were mainly 4s and 5s, you're probably already a fairly assertive person. If you circled mostly 1s and 2s, chances are you'll benefit from assertiveness training.

Special services can save money

Our handicapped children's educational rights are theirs as part of an American system that supports the idea of free, public education for its children. Also, the rights are currently guaranteed to them by law. Even so, some additional support may be necessary for the parent who's about to communicate with her child's school for the first time and is requesting a change or improvement in service.

Keeping in mind two lines of thought about special education can strengthen one's conviction about its value and the need for the extra services being requested for a child:

First, while it's true that special education services can be more costly than those for nonhandicapped students and while certain programs are designed for only a few youngsters rather than for the majority of the school population, it's also true that schools have always offered non-special education programs that involve extra costs and are designed for the benefit of only some of the students -- football, drama, and band, to name only a few.

Second, even if we put aside the human worth of special education services and the value of an education that develops the potential, and consider only the cost or financial justification of special education, support for special education services is still found. In a report prepared by Barbara J. Smith from the Council for Exceptional Children in Reston, Virginia results of several studies were reported.[2]

Included in the findings were:

. A review of statistics compiled by Rehabilitation International in cooperation with the United Nations pointed out that "the lifetime earnings of mildly retarded adults is many times the cost of their

education - almost 6:1 adjusted for the percentage employed. Educational services can therefore be justified on the basis of earnings alone." (1982 study, "The Economics of Disability: International Perspectives")

. A United States General Accounting Office report estimates that with vocational training 75 percent of physically disabled students and 90 percent of mentally retarded students are capable, at minimum, of working in a sheltered workshop environment.

. Income taxes generated from gainful employment of a visually impaired person, it has been calculated, could produce savings for the community of $167,304. Savings from the lack of disability income maintenance for a visually handicapped person would be $61,144. Long-term savings for speech impaired persons totaled $87,067, and for mildly retarded persons, $441,289. (1976 study by D. Braddock, "Dollars and Sense in Special Education")

There is no need for the assertive parent to be drawn into lengthy arguments with school personnel about the value or cost of special education programs. However, remembering the above concepts may strengthen your beliefs in a way that makes assertive behavior easier.

Recognizing, then claiming your rights

The basis of assertiveness training lies in the theory that social behavior is something we learn. Accordingly, if a person has learned one type of behavior and it produces results that don't satisfy him, he can learn another, more effective manner or behavior - in this case, assertiveness.[3]

At the foundation of assertive behavior is the conviction that one <u>does</u> possess certain inalienable rights, for it clearly is impossible to stick up for one's rights without firmly believing that you possess them.

Some are simply human rights, possessed by everyone:[4,5]

- the right to be respected by others,
- the right to have needs as important as others' and to seek recognition of them,
- the right to have feelings and express them in ways that don't violate the dignity of others,
- the right to decide whether or not we want to meet other persons' expectations of us or whether we want to act in ways that fit us, so long as we don't violate the rights of other people,

- the right to form and express our own opinions and be heard with the same respect and consideration given to others,
- the right to say no and to refuse inappropriate requests or pressures without feeling guilty, selfish, or ignorant,
- the right to act nonassertively,
- the right to be wrong.

Other rights are possessed by parents of handicapped children because they're possessed by all parents:

- the right to ask for and receive explanations from professionals about your child and his educational program,
- the right to lobby singly or in groups for changes in existing laws and for creation of new services,
- the right to seek the kind of professional advice and evaluation you respect and consider appropriate for your child,
- the right to hope and work for improvement in the child's functioning without being told that you aren't accepting the child's limitations.

Still other rights are specified by law:

EDUCATION FOR ALL HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ACT
Public Law 94-142

- the right to a free and appropriate public education for school age handicapped children,
- the right to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) written with the participation of the parent for each handicapped child,
- the right to implementation of the IEP in the "least restrictive environment",
- the right to an assessment or evaluation of the child conducted in his/her native language and on a basis that does not discriminate against his/her race, culture, or handicap,
- the right of due process procedures for parents so that if they disagree with particular programming or placement decisions, they can appeal,
- the right to an annual review of each IEP.

SECTION 504 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973

- the right to have the programs offered by a school district to its nonhandicapped students be available to all students,
- the right to have at least some school buildings in the district be free of physical barriers to handicapped persons.

THE FAMILY RIGHTS AND PRIVACY ACT

- the right for parents of all students under 18 years of age to inspect and review records maintained by the school district for their child,
- the right of parents who feel that some information in the record is inaccurate or misleading to place in the records a statement commenting on or disagreeing with that information,
- the right to restrict access to the records to only those persons within a school system who have a "legitimate educational interest" in the particular student's records,
- the right of parents to restrict the release of the records to only those instances for which they have given their written consent,
- the right to a hearing about the records.

If you are to assert yourself and to advocate successfully for your children, recognition of these rights -- and a true, personal acceptance of them -- is essential.

The following are examples of occasions when rights were violated. Please read them carefully, identify the right(s) violated, and then compose an assertive statement that could be made to remedy the violation.

ACTIVITY THREE

1. During a school conference, an IEP is being planned for Jon, a second grader, who's been assessed for the first time and found to need special services for a speech disorder. Jon's teacher believes his hearing may also be impaired.

The principal points out that the screening given Jon and all the other preschoolers two years ago, prior to their kindergarten registration, revealed no hearing difficulty. The principal mentions the cost of a "specially-arranged examination for just one youngster" and tells the parents about the nuisance already caused the school by the delay in state payments to local schools.

The parents agree to pay for the examination.

2. Mary's mother has finally decided enough is enough and that she will need to formally protest the lack of services being offered her daughter. She is then criticized by Mary's principal, with whom she has worked on many community projects, for her lack of community spirit and cooperative endeavor.

"Your reaction really surprises me," the principal tells Mrs. Smith. "You know that we're trying to do our best with the money we have available. I thought you were one of the parents we could count on. I know we aren't able to do everything you'd like us to, but there's only so much time and money and staff. Now you come in and act all upset."

3. Mr. Johnson is concerned about a new math program being discussed by his son Bob's math teacher and the special education coordinator. He asks why they want to teach Bob math this way and why they think Bob can make progress with the new program. Mr. Johnson feels that Bob needs to spend more time with math than is being suggested with the new method.

The coordinator tells him that he really shouldn't expect to understand the reason for the new method "unless you take a few courses in the psychology of education" and that he should leave such questions to the people who are experts.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. The rights violated are the youngster's right to a free, public education (which implies testing services) and the right to a complete assessment done at the school's expense.

An assertive response by the parent might be, "Mr. School Principal, we realize that the pre-kindergarten screening showed no signs of a hearing problem. However, a screening is not an assessment, and the screening was done over three years ago.

"After working with him for several weeks, Jon's teacher has expressed a first-hand opinion that something seems to be wrong. Our observations at home support her opinion. We understand that the school is facing a financial problem. However, the district is also required by law to provide adequate assessment services, at its expense, and we believe that this has not been done so far. We will insist that Jon's hearing be thoroughly tested so that his teachers can begin to give him the instruction he needs.

2. Several of Mrs. Smith's rights have not been recognized. Among them are: her right to decide whether or not to meet others' expectations of her or whether to act in ways that fit her; the right to form and express her own opinions; the right to advocate for her child.

Her assertive response might be, "Ms. Principal, it's unfortunate that my requests about changes in Mary's program have disappointed you. However, I feel I am being a good citizen by insisting on the educational rights that belong to Mary. I'm not a very good parent unless I do what I can to improve her program. Also, the main point here is not your opinion of me as a model citizen, but the changes that must be made in Mary's classes.

"To begin with, as you'll recall, Mary's IEP specified that she should receive help each day from the learning disabilities teacher. However, I found out yesterday that she hasn't been seen yet this year. What will be done to correct this?"

3. Mr. Johnson's right to ask for and to receive explanations from professionals has been violated.

He might make the following assertive response, "I appreciate that this method is based on principles learned in college classes. However, I'm sure they can be explained in terms that the average person can understand. I do not feel that I can participate meaningfully in planning Bob's program unless I do understand the method being recommended, nor can I sign any program that's been planned without my understanding. So, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about this method and why you believe it will work for Bob."

The next activity calls for imagination and will help you better understand how you must accept the fact that you do have rights before you can speak up to defend them.

ACTIVITY FOUR

1. Look back over the list of rights given on pages 14-16.

2. Pick out one right from the list (or one that you've thought of yourself) that you would feel uncomfortable about accepting. For instance, perhaps the "right to be wrong" bothers you, and you don't like the idea of speaking up at a school conference if there's any possibility that your idea might not be correct.

3. Next, imagine that you have accepted the fact that you have this right. How would your life change? (To stick with the example above: accepting the "right to be wrong" could mean that you'd feel more free about offering your opinion at a conference, and if it were wrong, instead of being flustered and retreating, you'd realize that one error doesn't wipe out the entire worth of your input and observations.)

4. Finally, imagine that after you've used this right, someone took it away from you. How would you feel now?

5. If you're finding this activity helpful in personally accepting your rights, pick out a couple more and again go through the steps described above.[6]

The ABCs of how we behave

As the next step in increasing your assertiveness skills, let's sharpen the picture you have of yourself and gain a better idea of how you're likely to behave at the present time.

This activity calls for mental self-examination and may help you understand how and why, in the past, you may have prevented yourself from behaving assertively.

ACTIVITY FIVE

1. Identify three situations in which you would like to have behaved assertively but did not. (Concentrate on your own behavior, not on how you wish others in the situation had acted.)

2. Try to recall the thoughts you had at the time that may have stopped you from "speaking up" in each of the three situations. (As an example, perhaps at a school conference, you wanted to disagree with your child's adaptive physical education teacher, but you were afraid that the teacher would get mad and you couldn't handle that so you kept quiet.)

When you've viewed yourself in situations such as those described in *ACTIVITY FIVE*, it becomes clear that the beliefs people hold shape their behavior.

A psychologist named Albert Ellis describes this process and calls it his *"A-B-C" theory* of human behavior.[7]

Point A is the *Activity*, action or situation during which certain behavior is called for on someone's part. It's what happens to us.

Point B is the *Belief* held by a person that shapes his behavior, the way he responds to *Point A*. It's why we do what we do. If this belief is a <u>rational</u> one, the behavior that follows is likely to be <u>rational</u>, that is, behavior that's reasonable for a situation. If the belief is <u>irrational</u>, the behavior will be <u>irrational</u> or unreasonable also.

Point C is the Consequence(s) of the belief, the <u>rational</u> or <u>irrational</u> behavior that follows from the beliefs we hold while facing a situation.

According to Mr. Ellis' theories, many people - when faced with *Point A* or an *activity* that requires a response on their part - may fall victim to their own irrational ideas. Because of their thoughts and views, assertive or <u>rational</u> behavior does not result.

For instance, a person sensing a need to speak up at a school board meeting might be prevented from actually doing so by reasoning something like this: "Well, I probably couldn't get across what I need to say anyway, and people shouldn't speak in public unless they really know what they're talking about, and if I did goof up, it would be too embarrassing to stand."

Ellis also believes that there are certain <u>irrational</u> beliefs that tend to be shared by a large number of people; listed below you will find some that he views

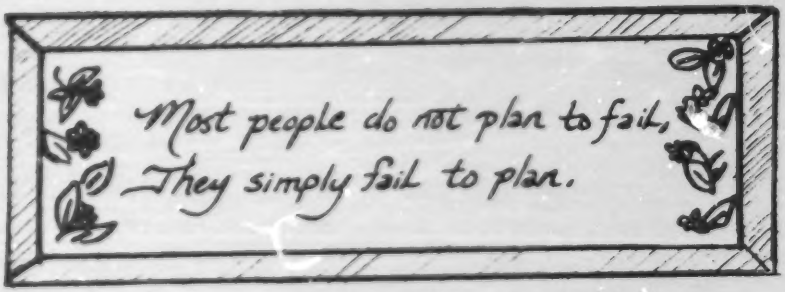
as the most common. When these are recognized in people's own lives and they understand what makes each one irrational, they can then better understand how their own beliefs are preventing assertive behavior. Then they can be replaced with their rational counterparts.

In order to understand best how these beliefs apply to your own life, they have been woven into the next activity so that you can contemplate and examine them one at a time.

To begin each section, first examine the irrational idea. Then, write down responses to the following four steps.

1. *Decide what kind of irrational behavior would be the likely result of the irrational belief.*
2. *Second, explain what it is about the idea that makes it irrational.*
3. *Then, change the idea so that it becomes a rational belief.*
4. *Finally, decide what kind of behavior would be likely to result from the rational belief.*

(Though suggested answers follow immediately after the statement of each idea, compose your own responses before looking at the suggested ones.)



ACTIVITY SIX

IDEA ONE: You must prove yourself thoroughly competent, skilled, and high achieving in everything you do.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The *irrational* behavior that's likely to result from this belief -- the holder would never try anything. He'd figure that since he might not be high achieving in his attempt, it would be foolish to try anything at all.

2. This idea is *irrational* because we know that perfection is almost impossible to attain. Never doing anything unless perfection is guaranteed would bring a total halt to human behavior on earth.

3. A *rational* form of this belief would be, "I will try to do my best and will often find it necessary to attempt many tasks at which I know I might not be competent at first.

4. The kind of behavior that's likely to result from the *rational* belief -- the holder will attempt new endeavors and will forgive himself when he encounters failure. Such failure would not be a permanent defeat.

IDEA TWO: People and things should turn out better than they do, and when they don't, you must view life as awful, terrible, and catastrophic.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The *irrational* behavior that's likely to result from this belief -- the holder will experience continual remorse, disappointment and dismay, and his own emotions would prevent any positive action.

2. This idea is irrational because we know there is no guarantee that people and events are going to turn out in any particular way - good or bad. Also, there's no automatic link between things going wrong and the necessity to feel extremely negative emotions.

3. A rational form of this belief would be, "I'd like people to act in a certain way, but I know there's no guarantee or promise that they will. And I can react to disappointing outcomes without letting them tear me apart."

4. The likely result of the rational belief -- the holder doesn't waste energy on unreal expectations. He deals more successfully with others because he doesn't fall apart if they let him down. When a school principal makes a statement that shows lack of knowledge about good programs for students with a certain handicap, the rational belief holder doesn't feel his stomach churning as he thinks, "A professional 'ought' to know these things." Instead, he simply starts presenting information to correct the principal's knowledge gap. When things don't work out, the holder doesn't allow negative moods to engulf him; he gets busy with other things.

IDEA THREE: People who harm you or commit deeds of which you don't approve are generally bad or sick individuals and you should blame, damn and punish them for their sins.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The irrational behavior likely to result from this belief -- the holder will spin his wheels thinking bad thoughts and plotting revenge. He will be too quick to blame other people for his own lack of success. Instead of working to

correct the problem, he may concentrate on pointing out the "badness" of others.

2. This idea is irrational because it's an overreaction and unrealistic. Very possibly the "villains" are perfectly within their own rights. It just happens that they aren't acting in a manner that fulfills your wishes. Even if they are committing immoral or illegal acts, name-calling will accomplish little.

3. A rational form of this belief would be, "A lot of times other people won't see things my way, and they won't work to my best interest. Things may go wrong because we each see things differently. Even if the other person is doing something that is obviously wrong, it won't do me much good to 'get even' -- it will make more sense to concentrate on solving the problem we're facing."

4. The kind of behavior likely to result from the rational belief -- the holder will spend less time on name calling and on figuring out who's to blame and more effort on resolving the conflict under discussion.

IDEA FOUR: Emotional misery comes from external pressures, and you have little ability to control your feelings or to rid yourself of depression and hostility.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The irrational behavior likely to result from this belief -- the holder would not take responsibility for his own outlook, but would passively allow life to victimize him. Feelings of helplessness and non-control would contribute to further "bad" things happening to the holder.

2. This idea is irrational because misery comes at least in part from within ourselves, and we do have some control over our own feelings. To understand this, consider the case where a similar tragedy occurs in the lives of two persons. The first becomes bogged down in years of grief, but the second soon recovers and begins to live normally. Clearly, the difference lies in the personality of each person, for the same external event happened to both.

3. A rational form of the belief would be, "I do have the ability to control my own feelings and to shape -- if not everything that happens in my external life -- the manner in which I react to the events in my life."

4. The likely result of the rational belief -- the holder will take positive action to improve his own life and to make things different for himself.

IDEA FIVE: You must have sincere love and approval almost all the time from all the people you find significant.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The irrational behavior likely to result from this belief -- the holder may hesitate to disagree or state his own beliefs, thinking that to do so would offend the other person and bring disapproval.

2. This idea is irrational because it's impossible for humans to love and approve of each other all the time, no matter how good their relationship.

3. A rational form of the belief would be, "As a

human being with my own mind, I will often do or say something that will not be met with approval. Also, no one is going to love me all the time, just as I'm not going to love someone else all the time. This doesn't mean the relationship will fall apart."

4. The likely behavior or consequence of the rational belief is that the person will feel increased freedom to think and act independently and to be honest and open about feelings.

IDEA SIX: Your past remains all important and because something once strongly influenced your life, it has to keep on determining your feelings and behavior today.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The irrational belief likely to result from this belief -- the holder doesn't attempt to change, believing her future is bound to be a repetition of the past.

2. The belief is irrational because the past, while it does contribute to one's personality, is - nonetheless - past. It's over. Outcomes can be changed in the future.

3. A rational belief would be, "I'm not the same person I was ten years ago. Times have changed and so have people and conditions and attitudes. Therefore, I can try all sorts of new things."

4. The probable result of the rational belief -- the holder understands that she's not a prisoner of past events and again attempts something that might not have worked before.

IDEA SEVEN: You can achieve happiness by doing nothing

or by passively "enjoying yourself", and it's easier to avoid facing difficulties than to develop self discipline and work on solutions to problems. When you confront something that seems dangerous, you must become terribly upset about it.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

1. The irrational behavior likely to result from this belief -- the holder will hesitate to confront those who're infringing on his or her rights, hoping that maybe the situation will improve, the trouble disappear. The holder may end relationships rather than try to improve them. His own fears will keep him from handling potentially dangerous situations.

2. The idea is irrational because, on a long term basis, avoidance of problems is impossible. They just keep coming back in one form or another and may grow worse if not tackled when they first occur. Also, the person who sits back timidly is more likely to find his desires and thoughts ignored, his wishes unfulfilled - a situation clearly not to his ultimate benefit. Also, the idea is irrational because it's overly extreme to say you must become preoccupied with a dire prediction. Chances are good that the awful outcome won't occur.

3. A rational form of this belief would be, "Something bad may happen. But I'll proceed on the basis that it won't. Even if it does, I'm a pretty strong person and have handled bad things before. Also, it's better to face it now; else it will probably just get worse. I know I can achieve the most happiness when I take positive action."

4. The likely consequences of the rational belief-- the holder acts to change those parts of his life that aren't making him happy. He doesn't sit and wait for others to come along to make his life fun and worthwhile. His relationships become more enduring since he attempts to resolve conflicts rather than to avoid them. He no longer allows his own fears to defeat him.

Exploding the myths

One barrier to achieving the kind of mental outlook needed for assertive behavior may be seen in the parent who's accepted one of the widespread myths about parents and teachers that have kept mothers and fathers the low folks on the totem pole of educational planning for decades.

Barbara Cutler, the parent of a handicapped son and a director of handicapped programs, identifies these myths and points out what's wrong with each one.[8]

MYTH ONE: Parents are naive laymen who can't and shouldn't offer opinions about their children's schooling but should leave it to the experts.
FACT: Parents are their children's first teachers. They may not have taken courses in educational psychology and methods. However, the remarkable number of tasks the child has learned -- before he ever experienced formal schooling -- were achieved under parental supervision. They have intimate and close knowledge of the child that the teacher, no matter how dedicated and observant, cannot possibly possess.

MYTH TWO: Parents are too emotionally involved to evaluate their children or make sound judgments about their programs.
FACT: Of course they are emotionally involved. However, that special closeness is what causes them to act and has given them the concern that will reveal

helpful information about a child and his family. The emotional involvement ties in with their long-term attachment to the child and their continued interest in his advancement.

MYTH THREE: Parents are still obedient school pupils who should be seen but not heard.
FACT: Parents, as citizens and taxpayers, are the purchasers of school services. They possess a legitimate right to be at the school in a position of observer and as judge of what their child is being offered.

MYTH FOUR: Educators are super experts in their field.
FACT: No matter how devoted, no teacher can ever understand every learning condition, every facet of every child, every teaching method. The best educators acknowledge their continuing need to learn, every day and from many sources, including parents as well as their children.

MYTH FIVE: Educators are totally objective - and, therefore, the best judges of programs.
FACT: Teachers are just as vulnerable to likes and dislikes, to pre-conceived ideas, and to close attachments -- or the need to detach themselves -- as any other human beings. Only when these feelings are acknowledged can they be dealt with successfully.

MYTH SIX: Teachers are free agents.
FACT: Teachers are only part of a larger system. They will be affected by their supervisors and school principals and their attitudes and knowledge, by the school budget, and by the philosophy of a school board. Parents will have the most success when they view teachers, not as all knowing, but as a small (though very important) part of a larger system.

The parent who's able to recognize these myths as myths and then to reject them will acquire a more realistic frame of mind and find it easier to deal with the situation.

Techniques vary with the situation

Now that:

- your assertiveness quotient has been measured,
- human and parent rights have been identified and accepted, and
- those myths and irrational ideas that might prevent assertive behavior have been examined and found to be self-defeating --

let's move on to a discussion and rehearsal of the actual skills that make up assertive behavior.

Several types of language patterns are used by assertive speakers who adapt their approach to the situation being faced.[9]

BASIC ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE simply means standing up for one's beliefs, thoughts and feelings -- honestly and openly, but in a way that doesn't violate the rights of others.

Examples:

"I think that the test shows an improvement in Johnny's reading in one way, but I still have some other concerns."

"Waitress, can you ask the chef to broil this steak about thirty seconds longer?"

"I'd like to propose that we give more thought to this redistricting plan and what it might mean to the total neighborhood before we vote."

EMPATHIC ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE occurs when the speaker recognizes and mentions the feelings of the person(s) to whom he's talking.

Examples:

"I know that you have already read a good deal of material on this subject, but I do feel that the book by Gardner could give you additional insight about a new approach that might be constructive."

"I understand that it's impossible for you to predict exactly what will happen under this new program. However, I would still like to hear more about your opinion as to the most likely results we're going to see."

Empathic language indicates a sensitivity to the other person's point of view and may contribute to an eventual meeting of minds. It should not be used just to manipulate the other person (as in "I'll butter him up and then he'll be more likely to see it my way.") Empathic language should be a genuine attempt to assess what it is the other person is saying and to pass information back and forth in order to be sure that each person understands what the other is trying to convey.

ESCALATIVE ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE is an approach used when you do not receive a satisfactory response to your first, polite request.

When the other person ignores your request or responds in a way that doesn't recognize the reasonableness or legality of it, you may need to gradually "escalate", that is, to become more direct -- though not aggressive.

Example of an escalative dialogue:

Mother: Mr. Principal, I would like to talk personally with the psychologist who conducted Joe's testing (Joe is a five-year-old boy with severe multiple handicaps.)
Principal: I'm sorry, Mrs. Brown, but the psychologist only comes once a week. There just wouldn't be time."
Mother: I can understand that her schedule is tight. However, I would like to know more about the tests and

their results before I can decide that Joe's assessment has been adequate.
Principal: Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but we do have this summary report of the results prepared for you to look at, and it will have to suffice.
Mother: Mr. Principal, Joe's combination of disabilities is very unusual and complex. I'm not sure that a psychologist who's only had one year of experience is really equipped to have total responsibility for the testing process. I need to know exactly what tests and sub-tests were given and what the psychologist believes should be planned for Joe's education in light of the results.
Principal: There just isn't time for her to see you.
Mother: Well, something will have to be worked out because I cannot consent to Joe's placement and IEP unless I'm comfortable with his assessment. I am thinking of having some outside testing done since I see several gaps in what's happened so far. However, I'd hope we could avoid that additional cost if the school's assessment could be modified and improved.

CONFRONTIVE LANGUAGE is used when people's actions are in contradiction to what they said they would do. In confrontive dialogue, the assertive speaker:

(a) describes what the other person said he would do,
(b) describes what actually happened, and
(c) repeats what it is that the speaker wants.

Examples:

"Mr. X, when we made the agreement for you to print our manual, you promised that we'd have it back by the 15th. However, it's now the 29th and you're telling me that only the first half has been printed. This delay is not acceptable. I will need an immediate commitment that we will receive the remainder of the manuals by tomorrow; otherwise, I'll recommend to our board that your firm be dropped from our list of approved vendors."

"Miss Z, when we designed and approved Sandy's IEP,

you agreed to her need for additional speech services. However, when the school's speech and language teacher resigned, you said another one would be on board within a month. It's been three months now, and I've seen no indication that the school has seriously attempted to hire a replacement. I would like to know what specific plans you have to hire a new teacher, and I will file a complaint by the end of March unless significant progress has been made in correcting this lack of service."

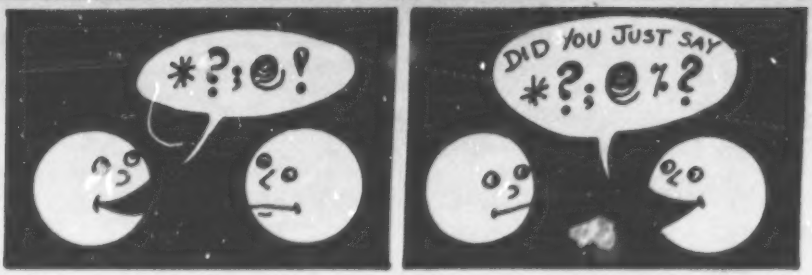
You'll note that no attempt has been made in the last two types of dialogue to call names or to pass moral judgment on the "offending" party.

The assertive speaker does notify the other party if he intends to take some kind of corrective action to change a situation himself.

However, he does not make threats; he simply says what he plans to do.

Assertive language:

- does not blame but attempts to communicate information in an acceptable way,
- tries to keep the dialogue open so that mutually agreed-upon solutions can be found, and
- attempts to keep the focus on resolving a problem.



Handling aggression with cool

When faced with a situation where the other person is very aggressive, the assertive speaker has several techniques available to help keep control.[10] There is no need to beat a quick retreat, blow up, or become flustered.

The first technique is known as *REFLECTION*. This simply means to make a statement that indicates to the speaker that you hear what's being said. You acknowledge the message though you don't necessarily agree with it. This may be enough to calm the aggressive person and to put the conversation back on a level where the conflict can be treated and resolved.

Examples:

"I understand that you're very upset because I don't feel I can sign Sam's IEP. I know you feel frustrated since several hours of planning have gone into it, and you don't want that time to be wasted. However, the IEP involves a whole year of Sam's life, and I just can't sign anything that I don't think is going to give him what he needs to succeed in the future."

"Yes, Sarah, I know you'd like to go on the skiing trip with your friends. I can tell you're very disappointed with your dad and me for saying no. But remember, you were supposed to be saving up for the past month to pay for part of your share but you haven't. We can't afford to pay for the whole trip for you."

A second technique to use in response to aggression is known as *REPEATED ASSERTION.* When you're involved in a dialogue where the other person seems to be deliberately trying to draw you away from the main point and into a discussion of side issues, this technique is a good one to keep in mind.

Basically, it means that you stick to what you've defined as the central issue and you don't let the other person involve you in useless and time-wasting arguments about non-related matters.

Sticking to the central point may be hard; arguing about emotional issues introduced by the other speaker - even when they're beside the point - can be tempting. However, the person who falls into this trap will typically find later that he's wasted time talking about matters that have nothing to do with the problem at hand...and that the problem at hand is still unresolved.

Example of REPEATED ASSERTION dialogue:

Parent: Mr. Smith, I see from this preliminary plan that Kathy isn't going to receive any physical education services.
Principal: Well, you know, I'm not sure we should dwell on that. I'm not convinced that girls should be involved in so many sports.
Parent: Kathy is entitled to receive physical education training just as all the other children do. I'd like to see it added to her schedule today.
Principal: Let's not rush into anything. It's just not possible for the school to work adaptive physical education into her schedule this fall anyway. Let's concentrate on the special reading work we've included in her plan. That's certainly a lot more important to her future than physical education.
Parent: Mr. Smith, Kathy's doctor has stated that she will benefit from physical education. You have a copy of his report in front of you. The law specifies that she is to be provided with physical education services.

We have already waited for this to happen for six months. I do intend to file a complaint with the commissioner if this service is not available by next month.

What's known as *"I" LANGUAGE* is a good pattern to use when you're in a situation with another person who would ordinarily be expected to respond to you with sensitivity but who, for whatever reason, is currently overlooking your feelings or needs.

The formula, created by Thomas Gordon, author of Parent Effectiveness Training, includes three steps:

(1) "WHEN..." (the speaker defines what the other person is doing that bothers him),
(2) "I FEEL..." (the speaker describes the effect on him of the words or actions of the other),
(3) "I WOULD LIKE..." (the speaker describes the changes he desires).

Examples:

"Bob, when you make jokes with your friends about the 'little lady' and all the supposedly dumb things I do, it really makes me feel put down. I start thinking up things I'd like to say about you to get even. I'd like to hear you saying things to your friends where you show me the same respect as you do when we're alone together."

"When I walked into this conference, it was evident that the IEP had been all worked out in advance and that all of you were determined to agree on everything. I feel no one has been interested in listening to any of the concerns I have about Kathy's program. I would like to add some goals that would address her need to become more independent in her work habits."

Finally, there's another useful technique where you incorporate a negative remark made by the other person

into the point you are making in order to strengthen your point. This technique is called *USING THEIR NEGATIVES TO BUILD YOUR POSITIVES.*

Using this technique, you don't let yourself be drawn into an argument where you try to defend yourself against the negative remark. Instead, turn it around to your own advantage.

Examples:

Mother: I'm glad we could meet today to talk more about Beth's program for next year.
Teacher: I'm happy too that we could get together because I'm really upset about the way she's been acting. I just don't know how she's going to learn anything when she can't sit down long enough to pay attention.
Mother: Yes, I'm also bothered by the hyperactivity and what it's doing to her progress. That's partly why I called to arrange this meeting. I think we need to call in the school psychologist to see if she can test Beth and give us some idea of what we should be putting in her IEP to deal with the excessive energy.

Customer: Mr. Y, I'm not happy with the quality of this printing job.
Printer: Well, I'm really surprised. I'm a good businessman, and I really try to do a quality job. And now you come in here all upset and everything and make a big fuss.

Customer: You're right. I am upset. And I believe with good reason. Half of the brochures are printed so light they're unreadable. As you said, you try hard to do a good job and I'm sure you'll see what can be done to remedy this.

Note that in both situations, it would have been easy to begin arguing about the other person's point. The human instinct to defend ourselves and our children is strong: "What? Beth misbehaving? You've got to be kidding! She's always such a good little girl at home".....or...."Who? Me? Upset? I'm very calm."

However, resist this defensive instinct. If what the other person claims is true and it's to your benefit to acknowledge it, do so. Then proceed to restate your request.

The following activity presents you with specific situations which might be encountered when dealing with your child's school and will help you become more familiar with the language styles just described. Before each description of a situation, you're asked to use a specific style (one of those explained in the last two sections) in preparing an appropriate response. Though a sample answer is again given immediately following each part of the exercise, please prepare your own response before looking at the one provided.

ACTIVITY SEVEN

1. *Prepare a response using CONFRONTIVE LANGUAGE that would be appropriate for a parent to make in the following situation:*

During a staffing a month ago, the principal of your child's school promised that the child's need to be seen by the district's psychologist would be discussed at the next meeting. At today's meeting she says that because of the rush of children needing to have IEPs put into place, staffings have had to be streamlined and there will not be time

to discuss services from the psychologist and that you'll have to talk only about the child's academic program.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

"Ms. Smith, last month we reached an agreement that Amy's need for psychological services would be discussed today. Now you are ignoring that agreement. I object and will insist that the earlier agreement be honored. I don't feel we can even discuss her academic program until we learn how some of her behavior problems may be affecting her learning ability right now."

2. Prepare a response using the "I" LANGUAGE FORMULA that would be appropriate for the mother to make in the following situation:

You are meeting with your son's classroom teacher. You know each other well and are somewhat acquainted with each other's personal lives. Today, every time you've mentioned Jonny's lack of progress in his math work, she shifts the subject to your separation from your husband and asks whether tension at home could be contributing to Jonny's problems.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

"Mary, when you keep tying together Bob's and my problems with Jonny's inability to do long division, it makes me uncomfortable. It makes me feel you're using 'tension at home' as a scapegoat to avoid looking for answers more directly connected with why Jonny's having problems in math. If you really think his home life is causing emotional problems, I'd like to schedule a specific discussion to consider what might be done. Today, however, I'd like to stick to the immediate problem - his math work."

3. Prepare a response that one parent might make to another in the next situation, using the technique of REFLECTION.

You've met another mother in the supermarket. She's furious because her son, who is physically disabled, has been teased and the victim of horseplay on the school bus. A call to the bus driver has not corrected the situation. She's now circulating a petition calling for the expulsion of the children who've been harrassing her child. Though you feel sympathy for the youngster, you're not sure that a petition is the right approach.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

"Alice, I can see you're extremely angry with the children, and you say the phone call to the driver didn't help. But I think it might be more productive to arrange a meeting with the principal first before spending a lot of your time gathering signatures for a petition. I'll be glad to help you prepare what you want to say to him."

4. Prepare a response to the next situation using the technique of USING THEIR NEGATIVES TO BUILD YOUR POSITIVES.

In the third of a series of frustrating IEP meetings, one of the teachers comments on how tense and unhappy you're looking.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

"Yes, that's how I'm feeling inside, too. I think that's how I often feel when I'm concerned about Sandy's progress but unable to find answers about a program from which she'll benefit. I know that I'll feel a lot better when we begin making plans for ways she can make progress, and I'm sure the rest of you feel the same way.

What's your appearance telling people?

In addition to the words you speak, many other facets of your personality and appearance are also saying something about you...and influencing your chances of achieving what you want.

The clothes you wear, the expression on your face, the way you sit and stand -- all determine your effectiveness.

Skim the following check list and use it to judge how you may be coming across to others. Its message may almost seem too simple. Certainly, someone who has never read even a word about assertive behavior could hardly miss choosing the person who stands straight and looks another in the eye as more likely to be treated with respect than the person who slinks into a room, sits in a dark corner, and hopes no one notices him.

However, in actual practice, we may find that we neglect to put into practice the actions and behavior that would work to our advantage. What our bodies and faces are saying about us aren't always the same as we might think or hope.

Evaluate yourself by checking the descriptions that best describe your appearance and style.

ACTIVITY EIGHT

___ *The clothes I wear indicate I'm a mature, serious person who's competent and in control of my life.*
___ *My clothes indicate I see myself as young,*

frivolous, and "thrown together".

___ When I arrive at a meeting, I sit out of the way where no one will ask me anything.

___ When I arrive at a meeting, I sit in a spot where I can easily be included in the conversation and where others would assume I'm one of the significant participants.

___ I'm able to control the volume and tone of my voice and my rate of speech.

___ I typically talk faster and faster when I'm nervous, and my voice gets shrill and whiney.

___ I try to look at a spot over the head of the person to whom I'm talking since looking at someone directly makes me nervous.

___ I'm comfortable looking at another person and maintaining eye contact when speaking.

___ I know what expression is on my face when I'm talking and listening, and I feel that it represents appropriate emotions (concern, anger, understanding, or pleasure).

___ I just try to keep smiling, no matter what someone says to me, so he or she won't be as likely to get mad.

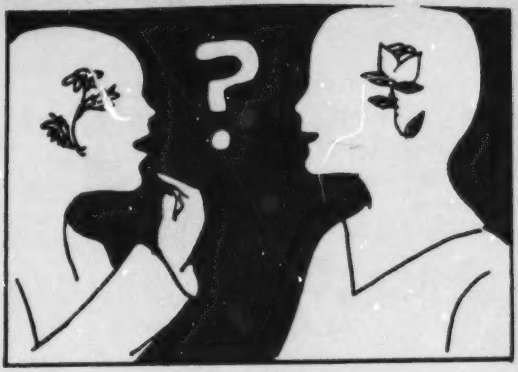
___ I sit and stand up straight and in a posture that indicates involvement and confidence.

___ I like to slouch down in my chair during meetings so people aren't as likely to notice me.

After you finish this quick evaluation, you might want to engage some friends and neighbors in simple role playing. Pretend they're school administrators and teachers and that you're at an actual meeting. Practice some dialogue that might take place. Ask them for their feedback about how you were coming across. The items on the appearance checklist could be used as a guide.

Or practice by yourself in front of a mirror. If you didn't know the face reflected there, how would you judge its owner: the effect of what he or she is saying? the appropriateness of his or her expression? the firmness of his or her eye contact?

Speak up— but listen well too



Compare the following behavior styles:

Person A sits slumped in a chair, only occasionally looking at the speaker. His eyes are usually glazed. The speaker has little idea of what his reaction is to her words. Person A shows nothing but silent acceptance.

Person B sits straight in her chair; her hands are writing in a notebook on the table whenever anything important is said. She looks directly at whichever person is speaking. If a point is not understood, the questionning look in her eyes causes an immediate re-statement or clarification.

Clearly, though Person B has not said a word, the manner in which she listens conveys to the others at the meeting that she is someone who deserves attention. Her manner suggests she's actually participating in events, not just passively watching them go by.

Person B is an assertive listener - her style communicates that she's involved with the outcome of those matters that affect her life and the life of her special education youngster.

Because of the interest she demonstrates, she's likely to find herself treated with respect when she, in turn, becomes the speaker.

Further, the active or assertive listening style will probably lead to a more accurate understanding and memory of what is said. The passive, daydreaming type of listener tends to hear only what he wants to hear or thinks he's going to hear.

Taking notes on important points and requesting clarification as the meeting proceeds also leads to a more effective meeting: the participants don't find themselves traveling down different roads of thought or coming away with conflicting impressions of what happened at the meeting.

Being an active and involved listener helps counter a problem caused by a difference in our rates of listening and speaking. While a speaker can speak only 100 words a minute, our brains can "hear" 500 words. This causes a familiar occurrence: our brains race ahead of the speaker, anticipating what he might say next, forming our own answers to what we think he'll say, building up arguments that we intend to make.

As a result, we may not end up with a very accurate idea of what the other person actually said. However, writing down the main points and focusing on his actual words to be sure we know what it is he is saying helps to correct the listening gap.

Finally, the active assertive listener sets an example for others to follow. If she has listened to them with interest and respect and patience, she has a right to expect the same communication style in return -- and she's more likely to receive it.[11]

Heading into the 'real thing'

Having an advance idea of how you'll handle a situation helps to ease the tension and anxiety you might be feeling as you think about speaking up.

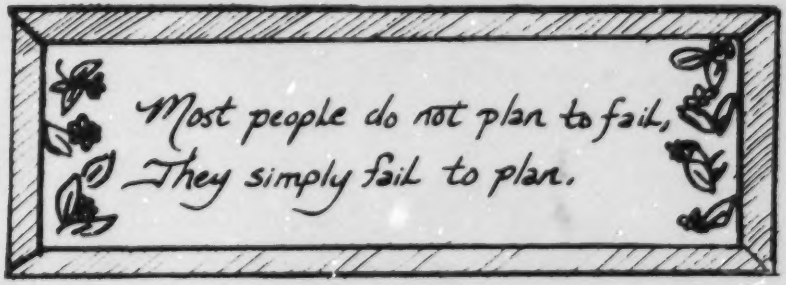
But don't become overly upset if you are experiencing some tension. Tension can provide us with a valuable clue; i.e., its mere presence can signal us that something or someone, in fact, is bothering us and that we must deal with the situation. Tension can give us the extra energy and drive we need to do well on a special occasion.

The goal is to learn to deal with it and keep it under control so that it doesn't defeat what we want to accomplish.

The real tragedy that anxiety can produce for parents is if they allow it to keep them from speaking up and requesting the rights possessed by them and their children.

Practicing beforehand is a good idea whenever you are about to assert yourself for the first time in a new kind of situation.

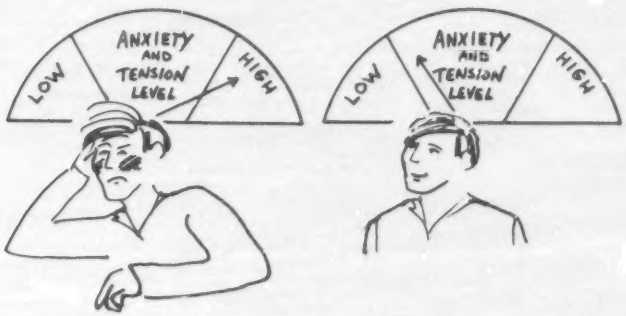
- Think about what you'd like to say.
- Anticipate how the other person may respond.
- Plan how you'll respond to that response.



One of the best methods for handling tension and anxiety is to "start small" when using your new assertive personality.

Don't plan to start practicing your changed style of behavior in a situation where the results could be crucial to you and your child.

Try it first on minor occasions: when you tell your sister you're withdrawing your free daily babysitting services; when you express concern to your husband over his refusal to let your daughter take driving lessons (though your son was allowed to do so at the same age); when you express concern to your wife over her neglect of the car and her expectation that you'll always take responsibility for taking it to the garage for maintenance; when you stand up to your neighbor who's determined you're going to be a Little League coach again this year even though he knows you don't want to be.



When you do get into a situation and feel your tension rising, do the following:[12]

- Practice taking several deep breaths.
- Acknowledge to yourself that you do feel anxiety and rate it on an imaginary scale (with a 1 for the most comfortable you've ever been and a 100 for the most tense you've ever been). The secret for most people is that they find their tension level dropping as soon as they rate it.

Don't allow yourself to panic or lose control. Realize that you do have an option in the event that you speak up and everything goes wrong and you feel on the verge of losing control: you can request that the meeting be adjourned for the time being and rescheduled for a later time. You don't have to sit and watch yourself become overly emotional and perform in a way harmful to your future.

Another tension-handling method that's worked for many people is to imagine a specific occasion in your life when you performed well and ended up feeling very good about yourself. Borrow now from that occasion and re-experience those positive feelings.[13]

Remember the assertive language styles practiced earlier.

Use them. They work.

Don't let yourself be drawn off the main point.

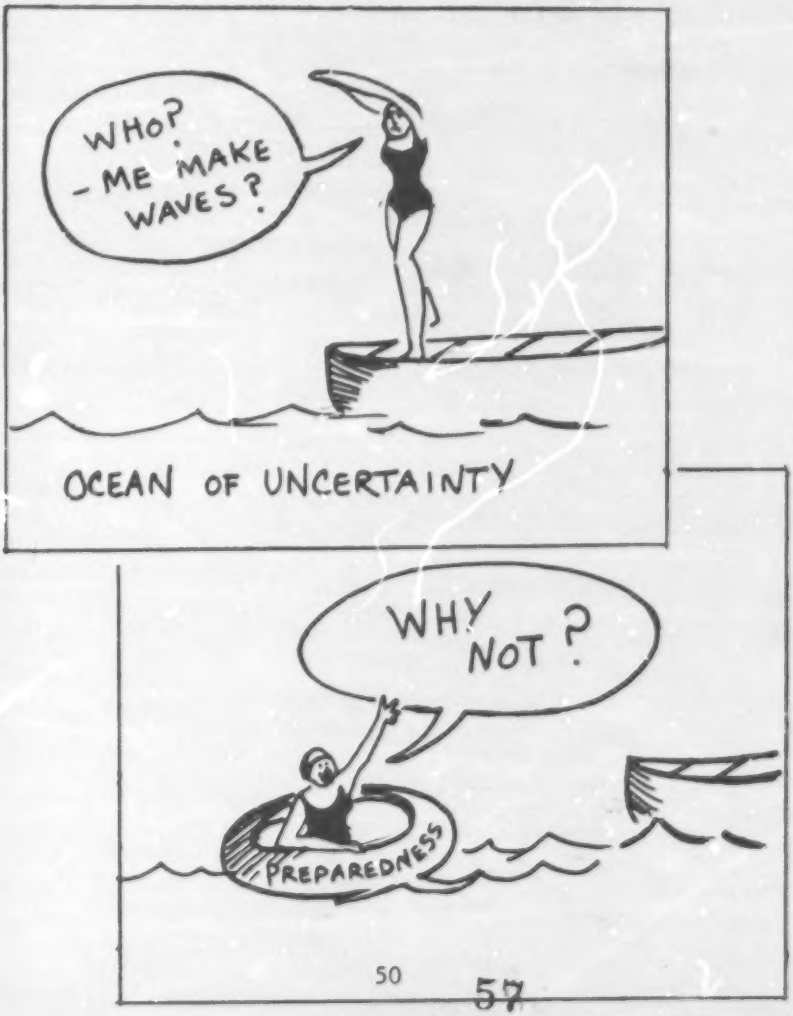
Turn negative remarks to good advantage in making your point. If your neighbor says, "But don't you think the Little League is worthwhile? How can you let us down by not coaching? You've always come through before for a good cause,"....you can respond with, "Yes, I have always been very good in helping out. That's why I'm having to cut back on my activities now. I think that since the Little League is such a good cause, although I can't do it myself anymore, this is something others will want to get involved in. We should have a larger group of people helping out with something worthwhile like this."

Once you have tried assertive behavior and found out how good it feels to personally do something about improving a situation for you and your child, speaking up again in the future doesn't seem nearly as threatening as it might have at first.

When you realize that your actions can benefit your child's future, the success you feel as you leave behind your 100 percent "nice guy/gal" approach becomes something very worth working for.

The rewards of speaking up can be so great that you'll wonder how you ever sat back silently before.

Speak up! Your child's future may depend on it.



Practice will make perfect—or at least better

To review and strengthen the assertiveness skills discussed in the main part of this booklet, the following exercises are provided. They're designed to include several people so that the situations are more lifelike than they'd be if you did them alone. Therefore, you will need to enlist the help of interested family members, friends, or neighbors.[14]

The first two activities, however, can be done by only two persons working together.

ACTIVITY NINE

1. Have each person in the pair spend 90 seconds talking about any serious topic that comes to mind (what he or she thinks of the administration in Washington, an evaluation of the school's special education programs, the price of groceries these days).
2. After each has spoken, the other person in the pair should give feedback (for example, comments on the kind of gestures used by the speaker, the appropriateness of facial expressions as points were being made, whether the speaker became less effective by appearing "squirmy" and ill at ease).
3. Repeat the 90-second speaking period and the feedback process for the second person.
4. Next, give each person a chance to speak again, attempting to improve on any weak areas noted earlier by the other person in the pair. This exchange could be repeated as often as you feel you're learning from the exercises.

The end goal of the activity is to work for the kind of non-verbal behavior that fits in with assertive speech and is likely to earn respect from the listeners.

This behavior would be characterized by firm and appropriate gestures, varying expressions on the speaker's face that fit in with the feeling of the point he's making at the moment, and a posture that conveys comfort but also involvement and alertness.

The critical question in judging non-verbal behavior is: Does it contribute to the effectiveness of the assertive words being spoken? Or might the speaker's non-verbal behavior be the kind that actually detracts from his verbal message?

The next exercise is useful in building your skill to say "no" when a negative response is required. Remember, assertive persons know how to speak up to express what they want. They must also be able to express what they don't want.

ACTIVITY TEN

1. Create a situation where one person in the pair makes a request with which the other does not want to comply. SUGGESTED SITUATIONS: (a) Your partner is your next door neighbor who wants you to babysit with her children; she's given you no prior notice and you already have plans. (b) Your partner is your child's school administrator who wants you to sign an IEP which you haven't had time to read, let alone discuss. (c) Your partner is your child's physical therapist; he anxiously wants to try out a new experimental technique with the child about which you've heard your own doctor express doubts.

2. Before you begin, review the techniques for handling an aggressive person and the types of assertive language (described in chapters nine and ten).

3. Remember, don't let yourself be drawn into side arguments with your partner.* Stick to repetitions of your original "no." Do not feel that you are required to give long, drawn-out explanations of, and justifications for, your refusal. Although someone has a right to make a request of you, you have a right to turn him or her down without turning the occasion into a trial about your motives.

*The exercise works best if the person making the request becomes quite [illegible]anding: i.e., won't accept your "no", appeals to [illegible]r sense of guilt, and argues about your negative response.

4. As soon as one person has made the request and the second has practiced a response of "no", turn the dialogue around and have the second person make the request and the other practice saying "no".

5. Once again, this might be practiced as long as is necessary to make you feel comfortable with the thought of rejecting a request.

The next and last two exercises will need several people as participants. The purpose of ACTIVITY ELEVEN comes from the strong connection between a person's own sense of worth and his ability to be assertive. One outward sign of people's feelings about themselves rests in their ability to receive and accept compliments graciously. People who evade complimentary messages or deny them are likely to suffer from a sense that they don't really have the right to be judged positively or that it's somehow wrong to stand out in any way and receive praise. In contrast, the person who accepts compliments with ease most likely has a feeling that he or she is okay and worthy of praise and attention and, also, has the inner security required for assertive behavior.

ACTIVITY ELEVEN

1. Sit next to each other in a circle.

2. Have the first person compliment the person on his or her right. Each compliment should be specific and sincerely meant. Stay away from the kind of remarks that attempt to manipulate through false flattery. The person receiving the compliment should make an acknowledgement to the giver of the compliment (the acknowledgement should be something more than simply saying "thank you").

3. The first receiver would then turn to the person on his or her right and offer a compliment. That person would also respond with some kind of remark of acceptance.

4. Continue with the giving and responding process until all participants have been included in an exchange.

5. After completion of the first round, begin around the circle once more. This time, the giver of each compliment should tell what he or she liked about the receiver's response.

To evaluate the results of this exercise, consider: Did the receivers of the compliments respond in a way that indicated they could handle positive comments about themselves and that they consider themselves worthwhile people?

The next exercise also involves a group of several people. Four or five friends would be an ideal number of participants.

ACTIVITY TWELVE

1. Person A (the first person in line) describes a situation in which assertive behavior could be used. For instance, she might describe an IEP meeting where the mother feels a proposed plan is based on an incomplete assessment. However, the mother is being asked to sign the plan anyway.

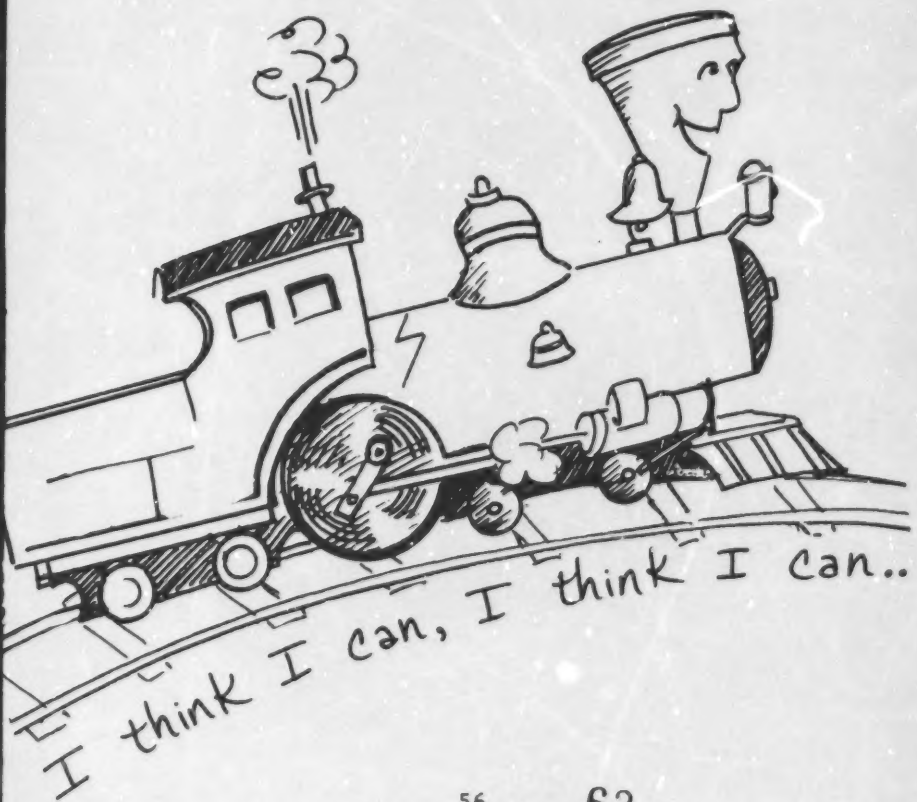
2. The next person in line (Person B) then actually plays the part of the "offender". In the above scene Person B would be the school professional who's pressuring the mother to sign the IEP.

3. Person C (the third in line) would be the actor who's attempting to use assertive behavior. In the above example, this would be the mother who

is determined not to allow an unacceptable IEP to be put into effect for her child.

4. Person D and Person E, the remaining role players, would observe and give feedback on how well Person C does in the situation.

5. Repeat this activity with different situations and change the roles each time so that each person in your group has a chance to play each part: the one who thinks up the scene, the offender, the person practicing assertive behavior, and the observer(s) who give the feedback.



As mentioned in the beginning, the material in this booklet has focused on teaching assertiveness skills for use in a parent/school/teacher setting. However, the same skills are, of course, useful in almost every circumstance.

The key to making them really work for you is to keep in mind the major points discussed throughout the booklet and then to apply them in everyday situations.

If you feel you've gained from reading the booklet but would benefit from more training, you may want to explore the possibility of enrolling in a communication skills or assertiveness-training class.* Many good ones are offered through universities, community colleges and adult education programs.

Whether you decide to take a class or to continue working on your own, remember -- assertiveness skills, like other skills, are developed over a period of time and through practice. The more we use this style of behavior, the more effective we become.

*PACER Center offers workshops on communication skills free of charge to parents. Call (612) 827-2966 for more information (parents of handicapped children outside the metro area may call collect).

Credits

Passages excerpted or adapted from other publications have been identified throughout the text with numbers and match with the following sources:

1. Geraldine Ponte Markel and Judith Greenbaum, Parents Are To Be Seen and Heard, Impact Publishers, San Luis Obispo, California, 1979, page 4.

2. National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Liaison Bulletin, Washington, D.C., Volume 8, Number 3.

3. Markel, Page 9.

4. Arthur Lange and Patricia Jakubowski, Responsible Assertive Behavior, Research Press, Champaign, Illinois, 1976.

5. Markel, Pages 10-11.

6. Lange

7. Lange

8. Barbara Cutler, Unraveling the Special Education Maze, Research Press, Champaign, Illinois, 1981.

9. Lange

10. Lange

11. Markel, Pages 55,67.

12. Lange

13. Lange

14. Lange

Other publications of help to PACER in preparation of this booklet and of interest to readers seeking a deeper understanding of parental rights and assertive skills are:

Charlotte Des Jardins, How To Get Services by Being Assertive, Coordinating Council for Handicapped Children, Chicago, 1980.

Robert E. Alberti and Michael L. Emmons, Your Perfect Right, Impact Publishers, San Luis Obispo, California, 1978.

Stanlee Phelps and Nancy Austin, The Assertive Woman, Impact Publishers, San Luis Obispo, California, 1975.

Ann Turnbull and Rutherford Turnbull III, Parents Speak Out, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, 1978.